Aid to Mothers With Dependent Children

By Emma O. Lundberg
Director, Social Service Division, Children's Bureau, United States Department of Labor

WHAT has been popularly known as the "mothers' pension movement" had its origin at a time marked by reaction against old forms of public relief and the institutional care of dependent children. The White House Conference, called by President Roosevelt in 1909, focused attention on the desirability of placing children, wherever possible, in family homes instead of in institutions. However, its fundamental proposition was that children should not be deprived of home care except for urgent and compelling reasons, and that "children of parents of worthy character, and children of reasonably efficient and deserving mothers who are without support of the normal breadwinner, should, as a rule, be kept with their parents, such aid being given as may be necessary to maintain suitable homes for the rearing of children." However, the ban which rested on public relief at that time was indicated by the suggestion in the conclusions of the conference that such aid to mothers should be given from private, not from public funds.

Accordingly when the earliest bills were proposed, beginning in 1911, the policy of a special form of public relief for dependent children in their own homes met with a storm of protest from the advocates of private relief. But the wave of sentiment for such public provision as would make unnecessary the removal of children from their homes because of poverty, grew increasingly, and by 1921 forty states and Alaska and Hawaii, had embodied this idea in their laws. Not all, however, have translated the legal theory into practice. It may fairly be said that the principle of home care for dependent children is generally accepted in this country, but the ten years' experiment does not by any means indicate that the problem has been met. In two states laws have been inoperative because of defects; in several others, practically no use has been made of the legal provision; and in many states where splendid work has been done in some localities, in other communities the intent of the law has been ignored or the provisions made have been so inadequate as to be of little avail.

Beginnings of the Mothers' Aid Movement

Before mothers' pension laws were enacted a number of states and localities had recognized the wisdom of the principle and had applied it in a limited way. As early as 1906, the juvenile courts of some counties of California granted county aid to children in their own homes; later, in 1911, the state began to reimburse counties for such aid given to half orphans. An Oklahoma law of 1908 provided for "school scholarships" to be paid by counties upon recommendation of the school authorities, to children whose widowed mothers needed their earnings. A Michigan law of 1911 also authorized payment from school funds to enable children of indigent parents to attend school. Through a resolution by the County Board of Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, in 1912, such aid was given through the juvenile court. In New

Jersey, aid to dependent children in their homes had been granted from county funds prior to 1913. The first concrete legal provision of aid to mothers of dependent children was passed by the Missouri legislature in 1911, applying only to Jackson County (Kansas City) and later, in the same year, to the city of St. Louis. The first state-wide mothers' aid law was enacted in Illinois in 1911.

SPREAD OF LEGISLATION

After this definite beginning, the movement spread rapidly. In 1913, a total of eighteen states enacted mothers' pension or aid to mothers laws; these were California, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin. In 1914, Arizona was added to the list; in 1915, Kansas, Montana, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, West Virginia and Wyoming—a total of eight states; and in 1916, Maryland. Six states—Arkansas, Delaware, Maine, Missouri (state-wide law), Texas and Vermont—and the territory of Alaska passed such laws in 1917; Virginia, in 1918, provided for allowances to widows. Connecticut, Florida and Hawaii were added in 1919, and during the same year in Indiana, an amendment to the Board of Children's Guardians law permitted aid from public funds to be given for children in their own homes. Louisiana passed a mothers' aid law in 1920, and, in 1921, the Constitutional Convention submitted such a measure as an amendment to the State Constitution.

The experimental character of much of this legislation, due largely to the haste with which the idea was adopted, is seen in the revisions and numerous amendments found necessary as the laws were put into operation. The first Illinois act was completely revised in 1913, and in other states five of the 1913 laws were completely revised and eight others amended in 1915. Similar changes have been made in the later legislation, but the majority of these amendments have been for the purpose of improving the administration, making the application more inclusive and increasing the amount of the grant or of the total appropriation available. The earliest Arizona law was in 1916 declared unconstitutional, and another act passed in 1917 was also found to be unworkable; a new law was passed in 1921. Because of a defect in the appropriation section, the Maryland law of 1916 has been inoperative. In a few other states, while the validity of the laws has not been questioned, they have been largely ineffective because of failure to make the necessary funds available.

APPLICATION OF THE LAW

The central idea in the propaganda, and the most common inclusion in the earlier laws, was aid to widows. Gradually this conception has widened, until now only six states of the forty limit the grant to children of widows, though all states include widows directly or by implication. The first Illinois act was entitled "funds to parents act," and the law that followed shortly after in Colorado includes a parent, or parents, who because of poverty are unable to provide properly for a dependent child. In Illinois, however, revision has limited the application of the law to dependent children whose fathers are dead or totally incapacitated. In seventeen states children of deserted mothers may be granted aid, and in six states, children of divorced mothers. Families where the father is totally inca-

pacitated may be helped in eighteen states; fifteen states permit aid if the father is in an institution for the insane or is feeble-minded, and twenty states if the father is in a state penal institution. A few states gave assistance to relatives or guardians, other than parents, having custody of a dependent child. The whole trend appears to be toward giving the benefit of such aid to a larger group of children in their own homes. In Washington, the law is applicable to any "mothers who are needy"; in Maine and Massachusetts, to mothers with dependent children; in New Hampshire, to mothers dependent on their own efforts to support their children; and in North Dakota, to any woman who has one or more children dependent on her for support. Michigan and Nebraska specifically include unmarried mothers, while in some other states the law can be so applied.

There is the same lack of uniformity in the residence requirements in the different states. Except for five states in which there are no stated requirements, these vary from one year in the county to citizenship in the United States with five years' residence in the state and three years' in the county. Citizenship in the United States is included in the requirements of only eight states.

In general, the age—by law or in practical application—at which a child is given this form of aid coincides with the minimum age at which employment is permitted under the law, although in three-fourths of the states aid may be granted after the child reaches 14 years of age. In only one state, West Virginia, the age limit is 13 years; in nine states grants may be made for children up to 14 years of age. Fifteen years is the maximum in seven states and 16 years in nineteen states. Indiana permits aid up to 16 years for boys and 17 years for girls. In Michigan grants may be made for children up to 17 years of age; Ohio and Vermont mention no age limits. In six of the nine states in which the maximum age is 14 years, there may be extension of the age in case of sickness or unusual conditions, or if the child should continue in school. In Louisiana the maximum age may be increased from 16 to 18 years in case of sickness or incapacity. Because of inadequate appropriations it is doubtful, however, if a very considerable number of children above the compulsory education age are beneficiaries of these acts.

CAUSES OF DEPENDENCY

Any attempt to analyze the character of the disabilities that cause families to become applicants for this form of public assistance, must take into account variations of practice, due largely to the inadequacy of the funds and, perhaps, in lesser degree, to the differences in administrative rulings in states and localities operating under apparently similar legal provisions. The distribution of the reported causes of dependency in a total of 9,194 cases of aid to mothers of dependent children is shown in Figure 1. The figures are for the states of Colorado, Massachusetts, Maine, Minnesota and Nebraska, in all of which the application of the law is very inclusive.

In view of the original emphasis on aid for children of widows, it is significant to note that families of widowed mothers represent three-fourths of the entire number. It is probably true that the percentages of families in which the father was incapacitated physically or mentally, or in which divorce, desertion or imprisonment of the father were the causes of dependency, are lower than they would be in actual fact if the limitation of funds

did not stand in the way. At any rate, the 25 per cent in which the death of the father was not the occasion for aid shows the necessity for a more general application of this form of assistance to children than was at first recognized.

The figures for two states, Michigan and Wisconsin, that extend aid to still other groups than those mentioned above, are of interest as indicating the types of need that are still unmet in most states. In Michigan, aid may be given to unmarried mothers, and while it may be assumed that such aid was kept at a minimum, 1 per cent of almost 7,000 mothers were unmarried. In Wisconsin, aid may be given to grandparents or to others having the custody of a dependent child. Out of a total of almost 6,000 cases, 8 per cent were children who were orphans.

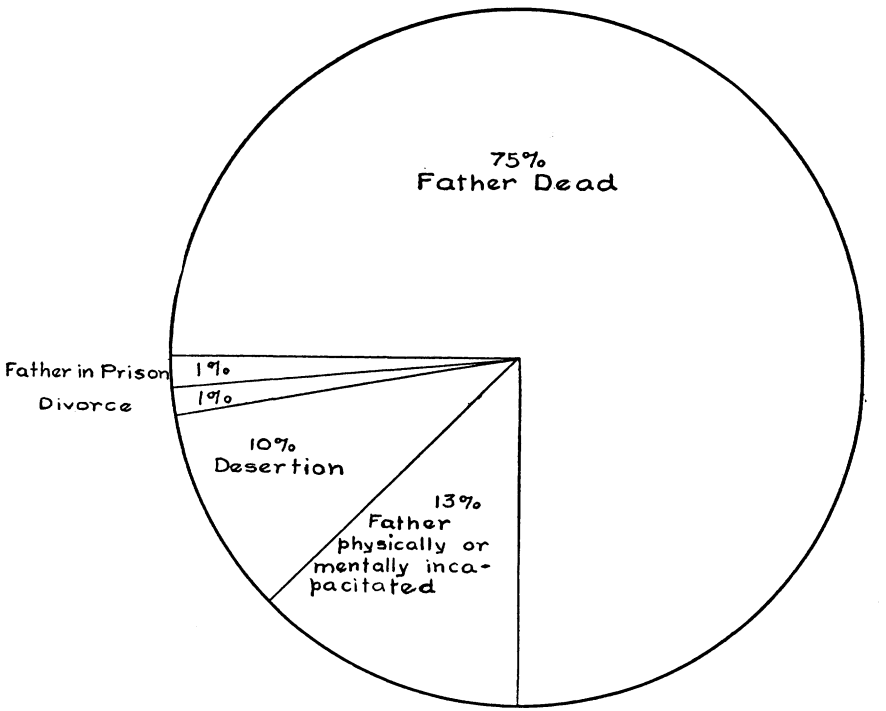
CHILDREN AIDED

Data on the number of children toward whose support in their own homes public grants are made, are available only to a limited extent. For a number of states and cities the proportion of children granted allowances to the total population under fifteen years of age, ranges from one-tenth of one per cent to 1.9 per cent. If similar conditions prevailed in the remaining states, it is estimated that the total number of children to receive such aid in the United States would approximate 200,000. If, on the other hand, the estimate were based on the proportion of children found to

FIGURE 1

CAUSES OF DEPENDENCY

Based on 9,194 Families Receiving Mothers' Pensions in 5 States.



be in need of such aid in the communities where this assistance seems to be given on a fairly adequate basis both as to inclusion and amount of grants, the total number of children in the United States for whom aid should be granted in their own homes would be closer to 350,000 or 400,000—and probably beyond even this estimate if all types of more or less permanent family disability were included. The situation that now appears to exist, in which there are proportionately almost twenty times as many families granted aid in one community as in another, probably does not imply a higher economic level in the former, but may instead indicate an absence of proper provision. Mothers' pension administration offers perhaps the most obvious arguments as to the futility, not to say actual detriment, of placing laws on the statute books but failing to make them practically effective through adequate appropriations and proper administration.

The ages of children for whom aid is granted are rarely compiled by the administrative agencies, though this would seem to be a very significant factor. In two states and a large city for which age figures were available, including 13,553 children, 34 per cent were under 6 years; 60 per cent, from 6 to 14 years, and 6 per cent, 14 and 15 years of age. Thus, one-third of the children were below school age, requiring the more constant attention of the mothers. The average number of children in the families aided appears in most states and localities to be about 3.5.

REASONS FOR DISCONTINUANCE OF AID

An analysis of the reasons for discontinuing aid, as given in the reports of six states and five counties containing large cities, for a total of 7,480 cases, indicates to some extent the complexity of the problem, and the necessity for keeping constantly in touch with conditions in the home if the assistance intended for the children is to be well applied. In only 44 per cent of the cases was aid discontinued because it was no longer required; most frequently, no doubt, this meant that a child began to work, or that the mother's earnings increased or that relatives or others came to the assistance of the family. Too often the mother finds it impossible to maintain her family on the allowance granted, and elects to dispense with both the aid and the regulations that accompany it, undertaking employment that necessitates either neglecting the home or making provision for the care of the children elsewhere. In truth, because of the very common inadequacy of the aid, no reliable economic interpretation can be given these figures. The reason for discontinuance, reported as next in frequency, was the remarriage of the mother—16 per cent. In 11 per cent of the cases in which aid had been granted, it was later discontinued because the home was found unsatisfactory, the mother proved unfit to care for the children properly, or for a similar reason. In another 11 per cent the aid was discontinued because the mother or the child for whose benefit the grant was made had died, because the mother or the child was taken into an institution, the mother ceased maintaining a home, or the family left the county or state. In the states giving aid to families of fathers in prison or deserting, a small proportion were no longer aided because the fathers were released or had returned to their families.

INCREASE OF EXPENDITURES

When appropriations were first made for the aid of dependent chil-

dren in their homes, there was little actual knowledge in regard to the extent of the need to be met. As experience was gained, the funds available were increased. But a study of the situation in perhaps the majority of localities will show that the amounts appropriated for grants to mothers of dependent children are still far below what is needed to carry out the spirit of these laws. In states where there is some form of supervision by the state authorities, and in counties and cities where "case work" methods prevail, there is usually an effort to utilize the funds available in such a way that the families accepted for grants will receive the necessary amount of assistance, even though a considerable number of mothers with dependent children cannot be given aid. In one of our large cities the total state and county appropriation available for mothers' aid makes it possible to care fairly adequately for about one thousand families, leaving a waiting list that for the past two or three years has approximated eight hundred families who are under the terms of the law entitled to receive aid but who cannot be supplied. And this in spite of the fact that appropriations in this state and county have doubled and trebled during the past few years!

Figure 2 indicates the increase in expenditures over a five-year period as compared with the increase in the number of families aided during the same years. The five states represented are Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York and Wisconsin. Their aggregate expenditures for mothers' pensions in 1920 reached a total of almost six and a half million dollars.

By 1920, as compared with the totals for 1916, the expenditures in these states had increased 186 per cent and the number of families, 101 per cent. The obvious conclusion is that the earlier appropriations were found to be very insufficient for the needs of the families aided, and that as more funds became available, more adequate grants were made to the families under care. The data cannot be taken as criteria of either the amounts required or of the number of families eligible for and in need of this form of assistance.

INADEQUACY OF GRANTS

Amounts paid for the care of children in boarding homes by private child-caring agencies in 1920 approximately averaged $4.50 a week per child; for three children, this would be approximately $60 a month. For the states in which a legal allowance is specified, the maximum grants for three dependent children in their own home are as follows: $19 to $20, seven states; $22 to $29, nine states; $30 to $39, eight states; $40 to $49, four states; $50 to $55, four states.

The lack of uniformity and the apparent absence of the proper consideration of family needs for subsistence are indicated in the amounts permitted under the laws relating to mothers' aid in the state of Missouri. For Jackson County (Kansas City) the maximum legal allowance for a family with three children is $20; for St. Louis, $45; and for the state outside these two cities, $32.

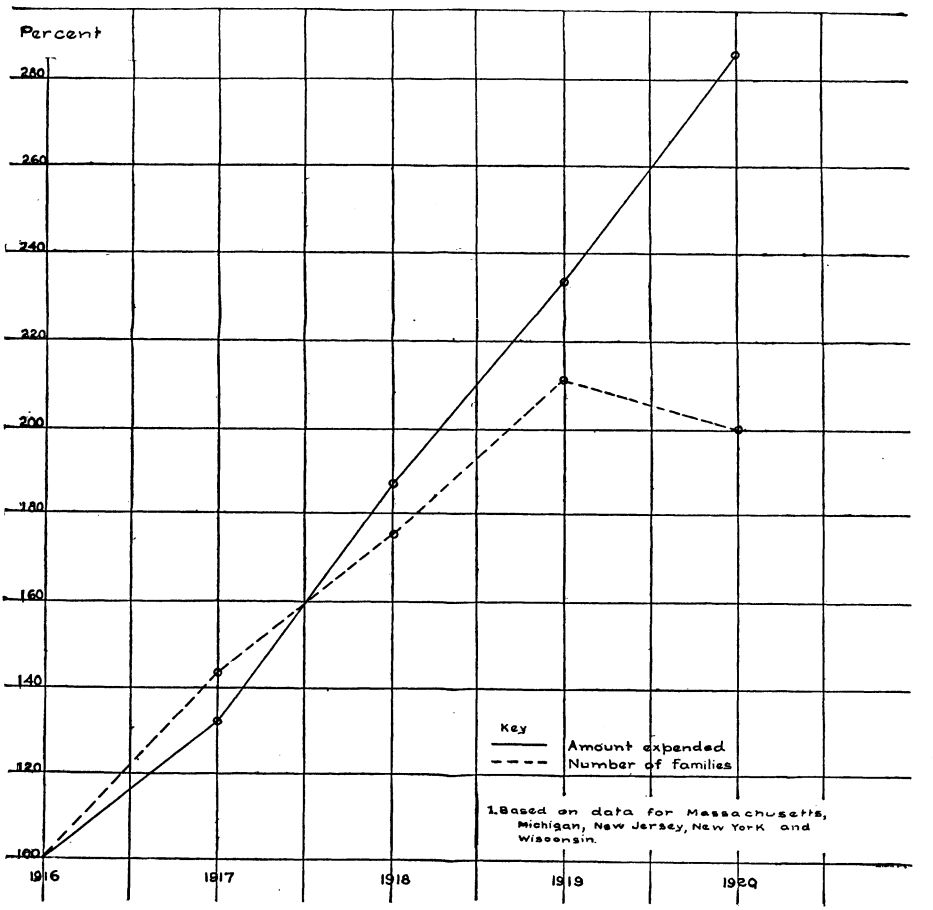
In boarding homes the family would necessarily have some other income; the families granted mothers' pensions are much less likely to have other resources. Yet the standard set in mothers' pension laws is approximately from one-third to two-thirds the amount found requisite by agencies for boarding children in family homes. Again it should be emphasized that even the inadequate maximum permitted by the terms of the law is seldom granted. Local economy

and inadequate appropriations set a minimum entirely insufficient for the proper maintenance and safeguarding of the children who are by this legislation recognized as being in special need of aid and protection by the state.

The more closely the administration of aid to dependent children in their own homes approximates the methods used in good "family case work," the more nearly does the allowance approach the needs of the family and the assistance conserve the welfare of the children. Not infrequently the public funds known to be required must be supplemented by private charity or ordinary poor relief grants. Or, as seems to be the situation in a very considerable proportion of localities, the allowances must be eked out by the mothers' earnings. If proper arrangements can be made for the care and safeguarding of the children while the mother is away from the home, this may work out satisfactorily. But it requires very careful attention to

FIGURE 2

COMPARATIVE INCREASE IN EXPENDITURES FOR MOTHERS' AID AND IN NUMBER OF FAMILIES AIDED DURING THE FIVE-YEAR PERIOD 1916–1920, AS SHOWN BY PERCENTAGES OF 1916 FIGURES



the situation in each home aided to make sure that the assistance given is such that the welfare of the children is conserved.

ADMINISTRATION AND SUPERVISION

There are four main types of administrative agencies: court (juvenile, county, district, etc.), county or town board granting poor relief, special county board and state board. The administration of mothers' aid in twenty states is lodged in a court having juvenile jurisdiction. In eleven states the county, town, or municipal board giving poor-relief administers also the aid to mothers of dependent children. In three states, Pennsylvania, Delaware and New York, there are specially created county boards for the purpose of administering mothers' aid. In the first, there is a state supervisor having general advisory powers, and in the second, a state mothers' pension commission with an executive secretary for administrative work; the New York State Board of Charities has general supervision over the work of the county boards and has power to revoke allowances.

An existing state board is sometimes given administrative duties. In New Jersey, allowances are made by courts, but the preliminary investigations and the supervision of the families are under the State Board of Children's Guardians. The general administration in Vermont is in the hands of the State Board of Charities and Probation. The California State Board of Control, through its children's agent, grants and supervises aid to orphans, half-orphans, abandoned children, and children of permanently incapacitated and tuberculous fathers, the counties also paying stated amounts. The Arizona law of 1921 provides for a State Board of Child Welfare, with coöperating County Child Welfare Boards, part of whose work includes assistance to dependent children in their own homes. In New Hampshire, the State Board of Education is charged with administration of allowances to mothers, working through the town school boards. In Florida, also, the work is tied up with the county boards of public instruction, but allowances are made by the county commissioners and supervision is in the hands of the State Board of Health in coöperation with the county boards. In Indiana, the existing County Boards of Children's Guardians were given authority to grant aid to children in their own homes.

There is some form of state supervision in eighteen states in addition to those in which definite administrative authority is lodged in a state board. In Massachusetts, Maine and Connecticut, the designated state board investigates recommendations of the local agencies, approves or disapproves grants, and exercises general supervision over the administration of grants. In the last two, the states divide equally with the town, municipality or county, the expenditures for relief; in Massachusetts, the state pays one-third. In Pennsylvania, there is a state supervisor of the Mothers' Assistance Fund, doing advisory work and aiding the county boards in administrative problems; the state makes an appropriation biennially, which is divided among the counties in the ratio of their population, with the provision that the counties must supply equal amounts. State appropriations to supplement those made locally have proved an important factor in encouraging local grants and in raising the standards of relief. Twelve of the forty states are authorized to share with the counties or municipalities the cost of administration or of aid. States in which the application of

mothers' pension laws was originally left to the initiative of local officials have frequently found it desirable to amend laws so as to make appropriations mandatory instead of permissive, and to supply some form of assistance or supervisory authority by the state, in order to carry out the intent of the laws.

The question of effective administration of mothers' pensions has been well summarized in the Standards agreed upon by the Conference on Child Welfare held under the auspices of the Federal Children's Bureau in 1919:

The policy of assistance to mothers who are competent to care for their own children is now well established. It is generally recognized that the amount provided should be sufficient to enable the mother to maintain her children suitably in her own home, without resorting to such outside employment as will necessitate leaving her children without proper care and oversight; but in many states the allowances are still entirely inadequate to secure this result under present living costs. The amount required can be determined only by careful and competent case study, which must be renewed from time to time to meet changing conditions.

Foster Home Standards for Socially Handicapped Children

By MARY S. DORAN
Of the Children's Bureau of Philadelphia

ONE of the most potent factors in creating foster home standards is a belief that the socially handicapped child should be given every chance to realize his fullest development; that his needs are fundamentally no different from those of other children and should be honestly met. Such a belief, the sort that translates itself into action, should permeate the whole staff of a children's organization and, particularly, the board of directors, for their position gives them the final say in determining policies. Board members, who in accepting their positions have voluntarily assumed the responsibility of intelligent parenthood, must uphold their children's rights in the midst of communities that so readily forget the defenselessness of childhood and value dollars and cents far above human life. Theirs is the privilege of bringing to the community an appreciation of the real value of a child's life and helping that community to transmute more and more of its gold into possibilities for the development of its childhood, that these children, so badly handicapped through loss of home and the fostering care of parents, may have the opportunity to grow into self-respecting members of society.

RESPONSIBILITY OF BOARDS OF DIRECTORS

Modern psychology teaches that what we do is, after all, what we really believe. A few years ago a certain children's organization published in its annual report the statement that its equipment had become such that all of the children in its care were "now" receiving "personal consideration" and being fitted into carefully selected homes; but it neglected to state in this connection that its board of directors was requiring the visitors to care for from 130 to 160 children each. If by personal consideration they meant